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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 05 DAMASCUS 000726

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [LE](#) [SA](#) [EG](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: SAUDI KING'S VISIT TO DAMASCUS: POSITIVE
ATMOSPHERICS, WAIT AND SEE ON LEBANON

REF: DAMASCUS 723

Classified By: CDA Charles Hunter, Reasons 1.4 b and d.

11. (S) Summary: According to a range of Syrian and diplomatic contacts, the atmospherics of Saudi King Abdullah's October 7-8 visit to Damascus were positive and relaxed. The two leaders reportedly enjoyed a lot of time alone (with the King's son, Prince Abdul Aziz participating) for cordial but frank exchanges on Iraq, Iran, Lebanon and Israel. On Lebanon, the two leaders reaffirmed their support for a consensus government structured on the 15-10-5 model. The King reportedly agreed the Lebanese parties themselves bore the ultimate responsibility for reaching a deal, but he insisted it was up to Syria and Saudi Arabia to provide the most positive regional environment possible to promote a spirit of cooperation among the parties. Asad reportedly called on Amal and Hizballah representatives in Damascus shortly after the King's visit to deal constructively with March 14. The Turkish Embassy is hailing the visit as a "major success," while reporting that FM Davutoglu conveyed Lebanese PM-designate Saad Hariri's readiness to visit Damascus once a cabinet deal was ratified. Most observers here believe a Lebanese government will be formed within the next two weeks. The next bilateral Syrian-Saudi meeting will be a gathering of the Syrian-Saudi higher business council to follow up on Asad's plea for greater investment in Syria. End Summary.

Atmospherics Positive

12. (S) Al Hayat Bureau Chief Ibrahim Hamidi, who attended most of the visit's events and chatted up Syrian and Saudi officials on the margins of the meetings, judged the visit was not the media extravaganza for which the Syrians had hoped, but Asad was nonetheless pleased by the result. According to sources in Presidential Protocol, Hamidi said Asad personally deferred to requests from the King's staff to forgo a joint press conference and to minimize Syrian TV coverage out of respect to the King, who is usually reserved

in front of cameras. Asad made a big show of receiving the King at the airport with full military honors and leading his procession to the Palace for yet another honor ceremony (they exchanged national awards). The official Saudi delegation (principals included the King, Prince Abdel Aziz, and Prince Muqrin) was accompanied by all of the editors of major Saudi dailies and TV stations. The King and his team met Asad for roughly 90 minutes prior to dinner; then the two sides were joined by Arab ambassadors for dinner. The King accepted Bashar's invitation to stay as his personal guest in the Palace (the previous plan was for the King to overnight in the Four Seasons). The following day, there was another round of meetings, followed by the King's departure late afternoon. According to several observers, the King, the King's son (Prince Abdul Aziz), and Asad dedicated a great deal of time to private discussions.

Lebanon: Different Nuances

13. (S) Diplomatic contacts are emphasizing the visit did not produce a joint statement, but rather two separate communiques. The Syrian language on Lebanon suggests the Lebanese themselves need to "look for points of agreement, which serves the interest of Lebanon, through forming the national unity government, as the cornerstone for the stability of Lebanon and for strengthening its unity, strength, and stamina." By comparison, the Saudi text emphasizes "the importance of achieving every possible

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measure that leads to Lebanon's unity and stability, through enhancing accord among the brothers in Lebanon, and forming a national unity government."

14. (S) The subtle difference between these two messages reflect emphasis, say Hamidi and al-Watan chief correspondent Ziad Haidar. Both journalists reported the two leaders discussed Lebanon in some detail but without finger pointing.

The King and Asad reportedly agreed the best outcome would be a consensus government structured on the 15-10-5 model. Asad stressed the Lebanese parties themselves bore the main responsibility for reaching agreement, while the King insisted positive messages from regional players were essential for creating a positive environment and for increasing everyone's flexibility. According to Haidar's read, based on side conversations with officials on both sides, "there was not a deal so much as an enhanced understanding." The Saudis registered their expectation that Syria would send positive messages publicly and privately to its Lebanese allies. No one walked away expecting an agreement immediately, but Asad made clear he hoped for a deal soon, said Haidar. The King seemed happy with what he saw as Asad's increased flexibility, according to what Saudis told Hamidi, but it remained unclear how deep into the details of Lebanese politics the two leaders delved. The Saudis left optimistic, but they were in a wait-and-see mode regarding Lebanon, said Hamidi.

15. (S) Turkish DCM Aydin Acikel told us October 12 that his Embassy in Riyadh had assessed the visit as a "major success." Differences over Lebanon, he said, had divided Syria and Saudi Arabia, and now only a deal in Lebanon would bring the two countries back together. The Syrians, Acikel conveyed, "fully understand this." So, he added, do the Lebanese. Acikel confided PM-designate Saad Hariri had asked Turkish FM Davutoglu to pass a message to the Syrians just prior to the King's visit, conveying his readiness to visit Damascus immediately after his government received a vote of confidence from the Lebanese Parliament. Davutoglu passed this message to Syrian FM Muallim shortly before the King's arrival, Acikel said. Muallim said he would share it with President Asad. "This (Hariri's message) is a sign the Saudis are pushing things in the right direction."

¶6. (S) The Egyptian Embassy was quick to note the different communique texts, but reported that Asad may have used a visit by Amal and Hizballah officials on the heels of the King's visit to pass a message to be less "harsh" with their March 14 counterparts. Still, neither the Turks nor Egyptians expected immediate results. The Turkish Embassy suggested giving the Lebanese "a week or two" before drawing any conclusions.

Iraq and Yemen

¶7. (S) Iraq was a central focus of the discussions, maintained Hamidi. While both communiques called for unity, stability, and security in Iraq, the Saudi communique stressed the importance of refraining from intervention in the internal affairs in Iraq. Some here interpreted the Saudi language as a possible criticism of Syria. Hamidi dismissed this interpretation as reading too much into the text. He noted both sides wanted to build on their discussion of Iraq initiated during Asad's meeting with the King at the KAUST inauguration. There, Hamidi said, the King and Asad shared their concerns about PM Maliki and the direction Iraq was taking. The King reportedly told Asad that Maliki had taken some steps to reach out to Sunni communities, but he had a long way to go. In Syria, the King reportedly reaffirmed Saudi Arabia would wait to send an

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ambassador to Iraq, Hamidi reported.

¶8. (S) In a slightly more Syria-friendly readout, Sami Mubayed, a pro-regime commentator who says he spent a lot of time chatting up Saudis during the visit, said he heard the King had criticized PM Maliki's accusations that Syria was harboring Baathists responsible for the August 19 attacks in Baghdad, not only because he thought the accusations lacked credibility, but because they sent yet another signal that Maliki remained disinterested in taking steps to heal relations with Arab neighbors. According to Mubayed, the two leaders agreed Maliki was perhaps better than many Shia alternatives, but they also saw him as isolated within Shia circles and increasingly dependent on Sunni support. Unfortunately, many Sunni tribes and politicians with strong ties to Syria and Saudi Arabia were unhappy with Maliki's government. Saudi Arabia and Syria, opined Mubayed, could well exercise their influence over tribes with strong bases of support in their countries to undermine Maliki and establish a stronger Sunni Arab political presence in Iraq.

¶9. (S) According to the Egyptian Embassy, which offered a different spin, King Abdullah told Asad Syria should avoid interfering in Iraqi politics; Asad denied Syria had any interest in doing so. On Yemen, the Saudi communique said there was "reiteration of the importance of supporting the Yemeni government and aid its efforts to spread security across Yemen." The Egyptians claim the King urged Asad to stop backing anti-regime forces. The Syrians, by contrast, denied any involvement and avoided any public mention of Yemen.

Israel-Palestinians

¶10. (S) Both communiques referred to the "tragic situation" in Palestine and called on Israel to cease "aggression" in the occupied territories and called for Arab unity. Syrian language emphasized the importance of unifying all Arab and Muslim efforts to lift the siege on the al Aqsa Mosque, and "confronting the Israeli occupation." The Saudi communique stressed "the importance of collaboration of the Islamic and Arab efforts to stop the continuous aggression faced by the brother Palestinian people."

¶11. (S) Diplomatic contacts expected prior to the King's arrival the Saudis would be pushing Syria to push Hamas toward reconciliation with the Palestinian Authority. The Egyptian Ambassador told us that the reconciliation had been hurt by PA President Abu Mazen's handling of the Goldstone report. According to Hamidi, the King and Asad viewed this as a "debacle," though the Saudis reportedly urged the Syrians not to undercut Abu Mazen. (The Egyptians, meanwhile, told us the October 25 Hamas-PA meeting had been postponed.) Abu Mazen's chronic political weakness represented a challenge for the entire Arab world in dealing with increasingly aggressive Israeli policies, assessed Hamidi. The King and Asad reportedly agreed to leave the Arab Peace Initiative on the table for now, but the King assessed Israeli policies as unlikely to change. Both sides agreed Arab unity was now critical to respond to Israel. "One of the main motives for Syrian-Saudi rapprochement is Israel," commented Hamidi, who viewed the King's visit as a strong signal that inter-Arab rifts must be healed to prevent Israel from imposing its will.

Iran

¶12. (S) Asad defended the necessity of Syria,s relations

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with Iran, reported Mubayed, while noting Syrian officials generally have been making this point so with less enthusiasm than they did immediately after the Iranian elections. Both leaders saw Iran,s ambitions in Iraq as contrary to their own desire for a strong, stable Iraqi government with a prominent Arab identity. The King's message on Iran emphasized Saudi Arabia's desire for Arab countries to stop allowing their differences to perpetuate Iran's influence. The King and Asad reportedly concurred that greater Arab unity would create more options in dealing with regional challenges. The Syrians, says Mubayed, couldn't agree more. Hence Asad's emphasis on better relations with Turkey, pursuit of engagement with the U.S., and even efforts to deepen ties to Iraq. At the same time, Syria was not contemplating "walking away from Iran," he said. The Egyptian Embassy noted that the Saudi delegation reacted sourly to press remarks by President Asad's Advisor for Media and Political Affairs, Bouthaina Shaaban, calling for an Arab-Iranian-Turkish "Islamic" coalition in the region.

Views of the U.S.

¶13. (S) Asad was upbeat about U.S. engagement but assessed the U.S. had backed down in its demand that Israel freeze settlements, reported Hamidi. Syria hoped for a strong U.S. role in promoting peace, but saw Asad abd the King saw the current U.S. administration as distracted by domestic issues and weakened by Israeli defiance. The King and Asad agreed that the President's involvement would be critical to the region and on the need for positive gestures to indicate their willingness to cooperate with the U.S.

Economic Relations

¶14. (S) The only deliverable (besides the exchange of medals) was an agreement on dual taxation. Asad, following up on a lengthy talk in Jeddah with the King about the need for better education opportunities in Syria, pushed hard for greater Saudi investment in Syria. According to Forward Magazine publisher Abdel Salam Haykal, the King reportedly agreed to encourage Saudi businessmen who will be attending a Saudi-Syrian Business Council scheduled to meet next month. Haykal downplayed comments suggesting this future meeting would be headed by foreign ministers instead of prime

ministers, noting Syrian PM Otri was extremely ill from the removal of a non-cancerous throat tumor. The Syrian side was working on a plan to expand bilateral trade relations and hoped to see an enthusiastic Saudi response.

¶15. (S) Overall, Haykal said he had mixed impressions of the King's visit, noting the atmospherics were positive, but many of the core issues dividing the two countries were still present. Haykal caused somewhat of media stir a few days before the visit by writing a piece for his Forward magazine noting that Syrian students at KAUST would be prevented by U.S. sanctions from accessing the university's super-computer. He reported the article had been taken off Syrian electronic media websites and that he had been advised by the Syrian security services not to publish articles that could be interpreted as critical of Saudi Arabia. Haykal mused that this was a sign of the Syrian Government's interest in making the visit a success.

Syrian-Egyptian Relations

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¶15. (S) Turkish DCM Acikel reported he had heard from Syrian sources that King Abdullah carried a message from Egyptian President Mubarak welcoming Asad to visit Egypt. An Egyptian Embassy contact could not confirm this information but noted the Syrians were adamant that it was Mubarak's turn to visit Syria. "That's probably not going to happen anytime soon," commented our Egyptian colleague. The Turkish Embassy reports that, after the first ministerial-level consultations of the Syrian-Turkish Bilateral Council, the Syrian and Turkish Ministers of Interior will fly together from Gaziantep to Egypt to attend the Iraq neighbors' conference.

Comment

¶16. (S) The lack of detail regarding what the Saudis and Syrians actually said to one another creates a lot of room for speculation and spin. Slight differences in the two communiqués suggests both sides came close to agreement in principle on Lebanon and other regional issues without necessarily reaching a deal on specific steps to follow. Though many Syrian and diplomatic sources suggest the positive vapors produced by the visit will transfer invisibly via diplomatic osmosis to Lebanese actors, it still remains unclear what Syria and Saudi Arabia agreed to do to encourage their Lebanese allies.

¶17. (S) Asad wants the onus for a deal (or blame for not reaching one) on the Lebanese parties themselves, but the King seems to have effectively conveyed the message that Syria has a lot to gain by using its influence in Lebanon constructively. Turkish and French encouragement, along with the prospect of a EU Association Agreement, are additional incentives that could tilt Syrian behavior in a positive direction. Many observers are reading the presence of Amal and Hizballah representatives in Damascus as a sign of Syria's desire to encourage its Lebanese allies to be more flexible. PM-designate Hariri's offer to visit Damascus also represents a reconciliatory gesture. On the other hand, past behavior suggests Asad may want more before asking Syria's Lebanese allies to make concessions that would bring Hariri to power. We would not be surprised if the Syrian President were seeking not only Hariri's assent on the composition of the Lebanese cabinet, but also his assurances regarding the Lebanese Special Tribunal, a commitment to articulate pan-Arab positions during Lebanon's upcoming stint on the UN Security Council, and an acceptance of the primacy of Hizballah's right to resist Israeli occupation.

HUNTER